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Art

Masterly Fakes

Look carefully: that "Italian Renaissance" statue could be a copy

By ROBERT T. ZINTL FLORENCE

Naked and grotesque, the famous *Bacchino* statue sits astride his stone turtle in Florence's Boboli Gardens. Tourists stop to splash their hands in the fountain below and slap the figure's fat belly.

Great fun—except the statue is not the original 16th century carving of a dwarf at the Medici court. It is a copy made of crushed marble and epoxy by Florentine artisan Andrea Fedele four years ago. The real *Bacchino*, still awaiting museum display, sits in Fedele's workshop, along with other Boboli masterpieces like the graceful *Ganymede* by Battista Lorenzi. Fedele's reproduction of the beautiful boy riding an eagle now sits overlooking Florence's cathedral dome. As with the *Bacchino*, no sign indicates that it is a substitute.



SUGLIEMO DE MICHELLI FOR TIME



DE MICHELLI

IS IT REAL OR IS IT EPOXY? The stand-in *Ganymede*, left, and unreal *Bacchino* at the Boboli Gardens

The real statues have quietly gone the way of more and more of Italy's open-air art treasures—into indoor safekeeping. Visitors to Florence's Piazza della Signoria see imitations of what used to be there: Michelangelo's *David* was replaced by a copy in 1908; the nearby bronze of Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* is a more recent reproduction. The lion and fleur-de-lis

crowning the Palazzo Vecchio are made of fiber glass. The Doors of Paradise on the Baptistery are still a gilded bronze, but they were made in Paris and switched with Lorenzo Ghiberti's originals last summer.

All this artifice makes Italians uneasy. "A copy, even if very well made, is always a heavy-handed transformation of the original," says Bianca Maria Scarfi, the archaeo-

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logical superintendent for Venice. Still, most agree that there is no other remedy. The copy of *David* has a graffito for drugs scratched into its base. Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabinas*, now inside the Galleria dell'Accademia, is almost unrecognizably pitted and eroded by pollution. A far cleaner copy is displayed outside. Says Pio Baldi, interim director of Rome's Central Institute of Restoration: "We can't remove the threat to these works of art, so we must remove the works themselves."

The practice is hardly new: Florentines replaced Donatello's prophets on the cathedral bell tower with copies as long ago as the '30s. But substitutes are multiplying as techniques become cheaper and easier. Copyists make an impression of a statue's surface by coating it with silicon, which is peeled off to make a mold that can be filled with a malleable composite of pulverized marble, sandstone, epoxies or plastic. The century-old reproduction of the *David* was painstakingly carved from a single block of marble, virtually a work of art itself; Fedele's copy of the *Bacchino* took six weeks to make and cost only \$6,500.



But the original winged lion braves Venice's pollution

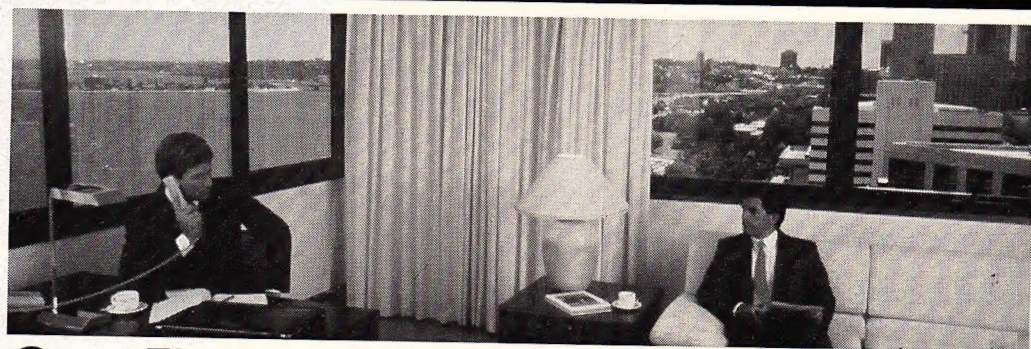
Not everything can be remade so fast or so well. Annamaria Giusti, director of stone-sculpture restoration in Florence, notes that Ghiberti's original *Doors of Paradise* were gilded by being dipped in a thin layer of liquid gold floating on mercury. Health and environmental laws prevent modern workshops from repeating the process, so the copied doors lack the patina of the original. Some

cities simply refuse to replace great works. The 4th century B.C. winged lion that sits atop a column in Venice's Piazzetta San Marco was restored and returned to the city last April. So important is the lion as a symbol of the city and its people that the original was put back on its pedestal despite the risk from Venice's heavy industrial pollution.

Romans are equally attached to the 2nd century equestrian statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which until 1981 was the focal point of Michelangelo's Renaissance Piazza del Campidoglio. A decade-long restoration was completed last year, but the statue's age and its importance as a symbol of the Roman commune make it too vulnerable a target. Last month vandals sprayed graffiti on the statue's empty base.

Moreover, the statue is considered too delicate to be subjected to a mold of any kind, and its custodians are investigating ways to produce a copy without damaging the original. Until then, the Roman Emperor and his horse sit behind glass in the Campidoglio's Palazzo dei Conservatori, and Michelangelo's magnificent piazza lies empty at its heart.

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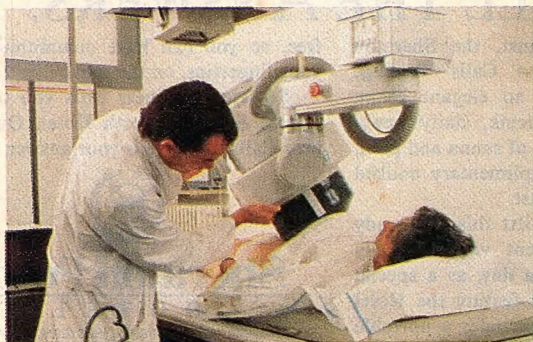
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